

Beyond the Absence of Illness

Until fairly recently, we Americans paid little attention to health as a positive concept. Although much of the good health that we enjoy today can be traced to the application of public health measures, our emphasis in recent years has been on medical care and its attendant costs. Health promotion, which might properly be described as the active pursuit of physical and emotional enrichment, was an idea whose time seemed, always, to be just around the corner.

Until fairly recently, that is. . . . It was my privilege, several weeks ago, to issue "Healthy People: The Surgeon General's Report on Health Promotion and Disease Prevention." This document, which reflects the best thinking of health experts in and out of government and the views of concerned citizens from all parts of the country, calls for a major reordering of the nation's health priorities to put greater emphasis than ever before on the prevention of disease and the promotion of good health.

"Healthy People" merits notice for several reasons, not the least of which is its timeliness. Clearly, Americans today are taking a more active interest in their health and its preservation. They are coming to realize the influence that they, themselves, can have on their own health destinies.

At the same time, health professionals are beginning to look beyond

traditional, treatment-oriented approaches to health care. Increasingly, they are devoting their time and their talents to activities that can help their patients forestall the onset of disease and achieve healthier, more productive lives. And they are attending more actively to improving the environments in which we all live and work.

In other words, the shape of health care is changing, and we would be remiss if we did not seize the opportunity—and, certainly, this is a fundamental aim of "Healthy People"—to focus national attention on the emerging consensus that good health is much more than simply the absence of illness.

Implicit in this consensus, of course, is the need for a thorough reassessment by public policymakers and health-care providers of the balance—more accurately, the *imbalance*—that presently exists between disease-oriented and preventive services. This is not to suggest a pronounced curtailment of acute care services, for it is evident that such services are indispensable. Indeed, a major emphasis of this administration is to make health services more accessible and available where they are in short supply and, especially, for people of low income.

Yet, it is also clear that if we are to continue to improve the health of our people, we must spend more than just 4 percent of the Federal health dollar on prevention-related

programs. We must learn more about the hazards of our modern environment and do more as communities to mitigate their destructive effects.

Because there really are a great many steps that our citizens can take to better health, we must be creative in our attempts to encourage individual initiative, and we must work to increase the supportive capabilities of physicians and other health professionals, who, after all, know the territory of disease prevention and health promotion best.

Together, in the years ahead, we must reorder our priorities, as the report suggests, and concentrate an ever-increasing share of our energies and our resources on those measures that we know can prevent illness and enhance the quality of our lives. To the extent that we succeed, we will become "healthy people" in the fullest sense of the term.

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